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MacArthur as the Operational Commander in Korea:  
A Pawn of Conflicting Policies

By

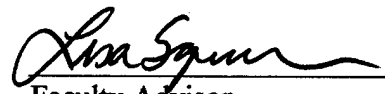
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College of the Department of the Navy.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The operational leader develops plans and formulates campaign strategy within the spectrum of the levels of war somewhere between the faint lines of strategy and operational art. National policy and military strategy meet at the operational level. Success is equated to the accomplishment of the military plans.

Unfortunately for General MacArthur, conflicting directives and a lack of policy permeated the Korean Conflict. Initially aligned, the President, and the Departments of State and Defense feared an escalation of the conflict and a potential World War III. As the ground campaign developed though, differing directives from these offices were delivered to General MacArthur with respect to US and UN expectations and desires in the region. MacArthur was then left to decipher the conflicting and often inadequate guidance and do what he believed was best for the forces on the ground, the Far East, the United States and consequently the United Nations.

The contradictory policies are most evident when examining decisions to permit activity across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, determining what type of war was being waged in Korea, whether or not the drive should be for reunification of the North and the South, and lastly what actions to take against the Chinese in North Korea. In each of these situations, MacArthur was forced to develop theater and operational plans without a solid national strategy to guide him. Needless to say, this placed the operational commander in a variety of precarious situations and ultimately led to his demise as the Commander of the Far East. General Douglas MacArthur was a pawn of conflicting policies in Korea.

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*With deep regret I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations in matters pertaining to his official duties. In view of the specific responsibilities imposed upon me by the Constitution of the United States and the added responsibility which has been entrusted to me by the United Nations, I have decided that I must make a change of command in the Far East. I have, therefore relieved General MacArthur of his commands .....<sup>1</sup>*

*Truman, April 11, 1951*

How could an operational leader, chosen by the president and regarded as the authority in the Far East be relieved of command for failure to give “wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations?”

Was Truman accurate in his assessment that MacArthur, in the execution of his duties as the operational leader in Korea, was disregarding US policy and pursuing his own agenda?

Or, is it possible that ambiguities existed in presidential, state and defense department policies of this period, which required interpretation by the operational leader on the ground before implementation.

Guidance from Washington was limited. Worse yet, it was conflicting with regard to what US actions in Korea should be. With minimal direction and a lack of succinct policy, MacArthur was required to develop his own theater and operational plans. In doing so, he fulfilled the requirements as the operational commander during the Korean conflict.

To fully understand MacArthur's actions as the operational leader in Korea, it is essential to define the role of an operational leader on the ground and his role in Asia from World War II up until the outbreak of the Korean War. Additionally, a cursory look at U.S. policy with regard to the containment of Communism will be undertaken. One can

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lowitt, The Truman-MacArthur Controversy, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co, 1967), 45.

then begin to evaluate MacArthur's actions in response to conflicting policies being generated out of Washington. Specifically, the commitment of forces above the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the type of war to be executed, the decision to reunify Korea, and the China equation, will all be discussed in light of the policies articulated and General MacArthur's subsequent actions. Only then can one conclude whether or not MacArthur was a commander who disobeyed orders or a pawn caught between conflicting policies.

### **THE ROLE OF AN OPERATIONAL LEADER**

The operational leader develops plans and formulates campaign strategy in the spectrum of the levels of war which lie between the faint lines of strategy and operational art. The level of war at which the fight will take place will probably be in the gray-area defined as the Operational-Strategic level.

A complex battlefield environment confronts the operational leader. This presents a number of challenges and considerations that must be addressed in order to achieve the objective. Leadership challenges in operational planning must include the battlefield dimensions of height, width and depth plus consideration of time, space and force factors. Battlefield intensity might range from conventional weaponry to any variety or combination of weapons of mass destruction. Relationship between levels of command, branches of service, and countries dictates a forceful, but fair leadership style. Domestic policies or the international political environment influences decisions and strategic guidance. The leader at this level of war must have a complete understanding of the reasons for national policy, aims and goals. The leader must be able to shape all of these

factors into a workable theater strategy.<sup>2</sup>

The role of the operational leader is to "...translate national or theater-strategic aims and tasks into militarily attainable operational or strategic objectives."<sup>3</sup> To think operationally, the leader must be able to effectively organize the forces at hand. It requires understanding the strategic plan and realizing your place in the scheme. The leader must envision the desired end-state and have articulated it higher and lower in the command. Operational thinking requires the leader to follow guidelines and abide by the learned and accepted rules of warfare. Central to the role of the operational leader, is establishing boundaries and hierarchy of command, ensuring availability of information required for informed decision-making, and proper assignment of missions.

"Operational leadership provides the interface between national...policy and military strategy.... It transforms the goals determined by the national-strategic politico-military leadership into military plans...." It is "indirect influence...in a positive action-oriented manner to create the conditions for success."<sup>4</sup> The operational leader is considered successful if stated national military and political objectives are achieved, the enemy is defeated, and friendly force retains the ability and will to fight. For the operational leaders in Korea, success equated to the accomplishment of the current mission in light of the changing strategy and objectives.

### **MacARTHUR: THE FAR EAST COMMANDER**

In 1935, MacArthur completed his assignment as Chief of Staff of the Army and

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Van Alstyne, Developing Individual Capacity for Operational-Level Leadership, (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," On Operational Art, 2<sup>nd</sup> Draft, March 1998, 252.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

returned to the Philippines, his fifth tour of duty in Asia, to serve as the military advisor to the President of the Philippines. He retired from active duty in 1937 and remained in country; having been "appointed field marshal of the Philippines by the Philippine government."<sup>5</sup> In 1941, as America entered World War II, he was recalled from retirement by President Roosevelt and named Army Commander in the Far East. At the conclusion of World War II, MacArthur, a hero of Asian campaigns, was the natural choice for the position of the Far East Commander. In this capacity, he was directly responsible to the 13 victorious allied nations for the occupation of Japan. General MacArthur conducted his responsibilities for the administration and defense of Japan with great fanfare reigning like an emperor, and viewed as one by the Asian people.

General MacArthur's area of responsibility as the Far East Commander included the entire western Pacific region except for Formosa and the Korean Peninsula. The Departments of State and Defense had drawn the boundaries after the withdrawal of troops from Korea. The State Department had administrative control over South Korea, and as the operational commander the obligation for forces under his command "had to do with the evacuation of...American and United Nations personnel..."<sup>6</sup> The United States was not prepared to meet Communism head-on in Asia. Communism had spread to China and was poised to threaten other nations in Asia. American influence was slipping away in the region. General MacArthur was responsible for the prevention of the spread of Communism within the Far East zone of American influence. He questioned American strategic objectives. He stated that "The United States has no definite policy in Asia."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 328

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 328.



General MacArthur firmly believed that the Far East continued to be at the bottom of U.S. priorities. His sentiment stretched back to the loss of the Philippines, and the primary focus on the war in Europe at the end of World War II, both of which MacArthur believed delayed the defeat of the Japanese. In his capacity as the Far East Commander, he expressed his opinion to the Department of Defense and the President that Asia was being ignored while the attention of the U.S. was focused on NATO. He pointed to the fact that the Communists had taken control of China forcing the Chinese Nationalists to Formosa. As a result, he felt strongly that Formosa and Japan would be the next targets of the Communists. He believed that the Soviet Union was in a defensive posture in Europe and that the priority for the United States should shift to Asia. MacArthur warned Washington of a pending crisis in Asia.

Despite MacArthur's warnings, U.S. policymakers continued to focus on Europe. The White House and Departments of Defense and State were content to leave the administration of American policy in Asia to MacArthur. To General MacArthur's advantage, this allowed him considerable leeway in executing U. S. policy and strategy. He was in possession of power and authority that was comparable to a head of state.

### **THE TRUMAN DOCTRINE AND KOREA**

The Truman Doctrine broadly outlined a policy of containment. In an address to Congress in March 1947, President Truman stated, "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."<sup>8</sup> When combined with the Marshall Plan and

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<sup>8</sup> Harry S. Truman, Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), 106.

the finalization of NATO, the combined effect was collective security against communism in Europe. None of the plans, organizations, or policies appeared to address the Far East.

In response to the Soviet withdrawal of post-war occupation forces from Korea, the National Security Council provided President Truman with three options for the United States in regards to South Korea. The options included: abandon the southern portion of the peninsula; continue to maintain military forces and political support; or, provide aid, equipment and training for a South Korean security force while withdrawing U.S. occupation troops. President Truman chose the third option and by July 1949, 65,000 combat troops had departed Korea for Hawaii or the continental United States.

The withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Korea conveyed the message to the world that U.S. priorities were shifting. "The President's chief concern was not Korea. That place had not gained new strategic importance since the policy papers of 1948 and 1949 wrote it off as militarily valueless. Truman and others were concerned about the system of collective security that...could deter a dictatorship like Stalin's from pursuing piecemeal its expansionists goals."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Dean Acheson provided the clearest indication of the peninsula's lack of strategic importance in his speech to the National Press Club on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1950. He stressed the importance of the security of Japan, but stated that the "defensive perimeter runs along the Aleutians to Japan...to the Ryukyus...to the Philippine Islands. It must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack....Should such an attack occur...the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the charter of the United Nations."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, Thinking in Time, (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 43.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph C Goulden, Korea The Untold Story of the War, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), 30.

The National Command Authority was in a state of transition at the onset of the Korean War. George Marshall had replaced Louis Johnson as the Secretary of Defense and Dean Acheson had moved from an Undersecretary position to head of the Department of State. The National Command Authority was in a state of turmoil at the time when President Truman needed continuity and stability. Positions on future policy differed widely and decisions were not made as quickly as would have happened with an experienced command team.

The leaders in Washington appeared to be shifting toward the policy of containment of Communism. The Soviet Union was solidifying their hold over world communism; they were consolidating control over satellites, and were ready to oppose powers that challenged their drive for world hegemony. The immediate concern of the Truman administration was curbing the spread of Soviet-directed Communism.

Douglas MacArthur viewed this as focusing the direction of U.S. interests solely in Europe and the Middle East. Withdrawal of forces meant that the Far East Commander's responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula were, in effect, reduced from operational control of a sizable combat force, to logistical support of the U.S. Military Assistance Group and, if necessary, evacuation of Americans from the peninsula. The operational commander was left without a national military policy or strategic objective in Korea. General MacArthur was forced into a reactionary role in Korean contingencies. He began asking Washington for additional forces for the Far East Command.

### **MacARTHUR: THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER IN KOREA**

From his headquarters in Tokyo, General MacArthur directed the initial American

response in reaction to the North Korean attack on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950. He flew to Suwon, South Korea, to personally survey the situation and provide his assessment of the military situation to Washington. Presidential guidance was for MacArthur to evacuate the Americans civilians from Korea, use air and naval forces under his command to support the South Koreans, and stationing of the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet in the Formosa Straits.

In July, the UN Security Council Resolution on Korea made forces available to the United States under a unified command, with the authority to select a commander. Actions against the North Koreans by this U.S. led command would be conducted under the flag of the UN. The unified command was not under the control of the Security Council; the commander did not answer to the UN. Authority was given to President Truman by the Security Council to name General MacArthur to serve as the United Nations Far East Commander. General MacArthur reported directly to President Truman.

The Security Council had three objectives for the Far East Commander to achieve. First, stop Communist aggression and prove that future aggression would be met with force. Second, confine the fighting to Korea, and lastly eliminate the potential for future aggression in Korea. General MacArthur would need land, air, and naval augmentation to his command to successfully accomplish his operational mission.

### **KOREAN WAR CONFLICTING POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT**

The North Korean attack across the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950 took the non-communist world by surprise. Faced with this surprise attack and lacking contingency plans with which to counter the North Koreans, Truman declared, "By God, I am going to

hit them hard.”<sup>11</sup> In Tokyo, General MacArthur received initial orders to support the South Koreans with U.S. Naval and Air Forces under his command.

It was President Truman’s intent to “conduct military operations either to force the North Koreans behind the thirty-eighth parallel or to destroy their forces below this parallel.”<sup>12</sup> MacArthur, on the other hand, believed that “...the time had come for the United States by military force to oppose Communism everywhere in Asia.”<sup>13</sup> The Pentagon never formalized the President’s intent of remaining below the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in the form of a directive or a national strategy. General MacArthur’s interpretation of his orders to support the South Koreans permitted him to bomb the source of the Communist forces in North Korea. The President, having failed to articulate his objectives and desired end-state, was forced to acknowledge and approve MacArthur’s attacks on Communist targets in North Korea--after the fact.

President Truman, along with the State and Defense Departments wanted to limit the escalation of the Korean crisis. Foremost in their thinking was the concern that the conflict could expand to Communist China and the Soviet Union thus, potentially inviting the onset of World War III. Conflicting guidance on how the war would be fought began to emerge as the UN forces began to gain ground in Korea and push north towards the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

#### **Commitment of Forces Above the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel**

General MacArthur faced the dilemma of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel as his UN forces pushed north. It would be impossible to totally defeat the North Korean invaders if the UN forces

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<sup>11</sup> Neustadt, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Lowitt, 4.

<sup>13</sup> I.F. Stone, The Hidden History of the Korean War, (New York: Monthly Press Review, 1952), 92.

under his command were not allowed to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. MacArthur and the State Department agreed that the border between North and South Korea had been an administrative boundary, and the North Koreans had already violated it. MacArthur felt that pursuit of the retreating invader should be justified north of the parallel.

The responses from Washington did not provide MacArthur with clear guidance. When questioned if U.S. forces would go north of the parallel, President Truman told the press, "it is up to the United Nations to decide, as American troops are only part of the overall UN Army opposing the North Koreans."<sup>14</sup> Although Truman declined to make this decision, it was truly his to make by the authority granted him by the UN.

The JCS, with the President's approval and the State Department concurrence, instructed MacArthur: "Your military objective is the destruction of the North Korean armed forces. In attaining this objective you are authorized to conduct military operations...north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel...provided that at the time...there have been no entry into North Korea by Soviet or Communist Chinese Forces...."<sup>15</sup> Further JCS guidance stipulated that no air or naval action was to be permitted against the Soviet Union or Communist China, and non-South Korean troops were not to operate in the areas immediately next to the Yalu or the Soviet Union.

Three days later, George Marshall, Secretary of Defense sent MacArthur a message telling him that "we want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>16</sup> Two weeks after Marshall's message the JCS expanded their earlier order and gave MacArthur authority to continue operations even in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>15</sup> Goulden., 237.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Smith, MacArthur in Korea The Naked Emperor, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 144.

the event of employment of Communist Chinese forces, it also required him to obtain authorization from Washington before taking military action inside of Chinese territory.

Engaged in combat operations, MacArthur did not need multiple, confusing instructions on who to fight and where to do it. He needed decisions from the President, and clear and concise military guidance from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. MacArthur, commanding a theater of operations half way around the globe, was left to believe that all of Korea was open for UN military activities and that targets inside China were now a military option based on the guidance he received.

### **The Type of War**

Following the North Korean invasion, President Truman was asked if the U.S. was at war. Truman replied, "We are not at war....The members of the United Nations are going to the relief of the Korean republic...it amounts to a police action."<sup>17</sup> The President "wanted something that was neither war or peace" and this "indecision made Truman at best an irresolute superior...."<sup>18</sup> With December at hand and the "police action" continuing, the President announced that "MacArthur's forces would fight on in Korea, without retaliating against the Chinese mainland or otherwise initiating any action to expand the war....Limited war, leading at best to limited victory, was the policy."<sup>19</sup>

The concept of "limited war" was new. It was never defined by the President and was never understood by America. It was a concept that was foreign to a military and a nation which had, only a few years earlier, crushed the forces of aggression with a total war effort. Now, the military was now being told to "limit" their efforts against the

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<sup>17</sup> Goulden, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Stone., 106.

<sup>19</sup> Rutherford M. Poats, Decision in Korea (New York: The McBride Company, 1954), 154.

Communist Chinese aggressors. Lacking any guidelines from Washington on conducting a “limited war”, the operational commander set out a campaign plan to destroy China’s war potential inside of North Korea. MacArthur planned for the isolation and destruction of the Communist Chinese on the Korean Peninsula. MacArthur’s theater strategy was “preventive war.” It was necessary to cripple the Chinese supply and logistics lines in North Korea, and MacArthur planned to do this south of the Yalu River. His plan could be done within the bounds of the national strategy of “limited war,” without taking the ground war to China. The operational commander was being restricted as to how and where he could engage the enemy.

### **Reunification of Korea**

Success at Inchon began to raise possibilities that American combat power could push the North Koreans across the parallel and change events in the whole peninsula. The UN had been advocating unifying the country since 1947. The UN passed a resolution, proposed by the U.S. Ambassador, calling for General MacArthur’s UN Command to retain the initiative, defeat North Korean forces both north and south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and to reunify Korea.

In Washington opinions differed widely. The administration showed no desire to extend the war north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Defense Department promoted the UN position. The State Department was divided and offered no position on the issue. Without a national policy decision on the end-state for Korea, MacArthur was left to make the decision on his own. He chose to bring the military force of his UN Command to bear on the North Korean aggressors and make them comply with the UN resolutions.



### **The Chinese Equation**

February 1951 brought success on the part of the UN forces in smashing the Chinese counter-offensive. The enemy was steadily being pushed northward across the whole of South Korea. The Far East Command sought to drive the Chinese forces out of South Korea and use air power to destroy the Chinese in North Korea. The question of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel was being asked again as the forces separated on either side of it.

Meetings in Washington between the State and Defense Departments on future actions in Korea resulted in conflicting reports. Neither wanted to be held responsible for the ensuing stalemate. The State Department indicated that it "... would prefer not to express political objectives with respect to Korea until military capabilities there were established."<sup>20</sup> From the Department of Defense, "... the consensus of the opinions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was that a political decision was required before there could be suitable determination of military courses of action." There were valid military reasons why the JCS wanted to avoid a halt. "... any decision would be premature until MacArthur had developed the main line of enemy resistance."<sup>21</sup>

MacArthur, who was left to wait while the Departments of State and Defense deferred to the other, believed that in the oriental psychology of a delay or pause in the military action would be taken a sign of weakness. Once again, General MacArthur was required to develop a plan that would meet the original operational objectives set down by the UN with little help from the policymakers in Washington. MacArthur chose to keep

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<sup>20</sup> D. Clayton James, The Years of MacArthur, Volume III, Triumph and Disaster, 1945-1964, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 577.

<sup>21</sup> Callum A. MacDonald, Korea The War Before Vietnam, (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 91.

pressure on the North Koreans and continued to push the invaders back to the north.

### **POLICY, PLANNING, AND OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP TODAY**

The likelihood of such conflicting guidance and operational "liberty" occurring again is doubtful. Over the last decade, the changes brought about by the Goldwater-Nichols Act have clearly defined the echelons of command and processes in which each echelon is involved. The hierarchy of the Joint Planning and Execution Community and levels of responsibility are clearly outlined and understood by military leaders and commanders.

Decisions on national policy, and strategy to be implemented by the armed forces are the responsibility of the President. He is supported in the policy making process by the other members of the National Security Council. The result is concise, organizational guidance on how the President wishes to shape the National Military Strategy.

Policy decisions that involve the armed forces follow a logical sequence from the National Command Authority through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Chairman is responsible to provide the Unified CINC with the policy decisions that affect their geographic region or their specified mission. The CINC then translates the national strategy directives and the guidance from the Chairman into unified plans. Contingency plans can be used in war, or the CINC may conduct crisis planning for a campaign.

In Korea, this process did not exist. Without the benefit of a well-developed national military strategy, MacArthur was forced to develop his own plans in response to the developing military situation on the ground.

## CONCLUSION

“The national strategy of any war- that is, the selection of national objectives and the determination of the general means and methods to be applied in attaining them, as well as the development of the broad policies applicable to the prosecution of war- are decisions that must be made by the head of State acting in conformity with the expressed will of Congress.”<sup>22</sup> General MacArthur stated his position and made his opinion known about issues that dealt with his area of responsibility, Asia. He also understood that the President, the head of State, set strategic objectives and made policy for the United States.

Authors have characterized MacArthur as a leader that failed to obey orders. General MacArthur was the senior military officer in the Far East and the closest man to the situation. Delayed decisions on the part of the administration were often overcome by events in the Far East Command. Failure to reach a consensus on the part of leaders in Washington created confusion in the field. As the commander on the ground with his finger on the pulse of the situation, MacArthur made timely and accurate decisions on behalf of the UN and the United States that saved lives and effort. Although MacArthur was selective in adhering to the conflicting directives sent out from Washington, he used his vast experience and military judgment to conduct the war in a manner, which he believed best supported the interests of the UN and the United States.

MacArthur was forced to be the creator of theater strategy, theater campaign plans, theater supporting plans, and operations orders. He was also responsible for operational campaign plans and operations orders and for all subordinate plans and orders.

General MacArthur was very often caught between conflicting opinions, directives

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<sup>22</sup> Trumbull Higgins, Korea and the Fall of MacArthur, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 122.

and policies. He was constantly faced with the gray-area of operational-strategic operations. Rather than translating national aims into operational objectives he was often left to discover what the aims were or weren't.

MacArthur fought a "limited war" with the forces made available to him. He pursued the aggressors north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, attempting to meet the UN goal of reunification. He fought the Communist Chinese in North Korea in a preventive war. As both the U.S. Commander of the Far East and the Far East Commander of UN Forces he often found himself in the middle of competing domestic and international interests. He fully understood this unusual position and had to balance it to carryout the operational mission in Korea, and the strategic mission in the Far East. Unfortunately, Douglas MacArthur was often placed in precarious positions and ultimately became a pawn caught between conflicting policies.

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